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FM AMEMBASSY RANGOON  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 5631  
INFO RUCNASE/ASEAN MEMBER COLLECTIVE  
RUEHGG/UN SECURITY COUNCIL COLLECTIVE  
RUEHBY/AMEMBASSY CANBERRA 0135  
RUEHKA/AMEMBASSY DHAKA 4453  
RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI 3712  
RUEHUL/AMEMBASSY SEOUL 7233  
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO 4811  
RUEHCI/AMCONSUL CALCUTTA 1033  
RUEHCN/AMCONSUL CHENGDU 1032  
RUDKIA/AMCONSUL CHIANG MAI 0818  
RHHMUNA/CDR USPACOM HONOLULU HI  
RUEKJCS/JOINT STAFF WASHDC  
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC  
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC  
RUEHBS/USEU BRUSSELS  
RUEHGV/USMISSION GENEVA 3020  
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK 0671

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 RANGOON 000081

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STATE FOR EAP/MLS; PACOM FOR FPA

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PREL](#) [BM](#)

SUBJECT: BURMA REGIME TRIES TO STOP TUESDAY WORSHIPPERS

REF: 05 RANGOON 1814

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Classified By: Poloff Dean Tidwell for Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

11. (C) Summary: On January 16, GOB backed thugs in civilian clothes verbally and physically attacked pro-democracy activist Naw Ohn Hla and her group who go to Shwe Dagon Pagoda every Tuesday to pray for the release of Aung San Suu Kyi and all of Burma's political prisoners. When she tried to file a report of the incident to the police, Naw Ohn Hla was turned away. This Tuesday, the group's weekly prayers took place without incident after several Burmese monks showed up to defend the worshippers. Several NLD youth and members of the 88 Generation Students were at the Pagoda to show their support. Well-known for her determined activism, Naw Ohn Hla intends to persist with her weekly pilgrimage. We see this as more evidence of growing defiance. End Summary.

ON THE WAY TO THE PAGODA  
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12. (C) On January 16, Naw Ohn Hla and her colleagues followed their weekly routine to pray at Shwe Dagon Pagoda for Aung San Suu Kyi and other political prisoners (reftel.) Two male worshippers from the group arrived first; one wearing a T-shirt bearing General Aung San's image and the other wearing a shirt with the image of Aung San Suu Kyi. Two men in plain clothes grabbed the latter, who had South Asian features, yelled racial slurs, and demanded to know what an Indian was doing in a Buddhist monastery. One of the men forcefully struck the second worshipper on the side of the head, injuring his ear.

13. (C) When Naw Ohn Hla arrived, eight others joined her to ascend the stairs to the pagoda. During the ascent, persons in plainclothes blocked their way and ordered them to go away, but Naw Ohn Hla countered that they had come to pay

their respects to Lord Buddha and would continue. A woman then slapped Naw Ohn Hla a few times. Although Naw Ohn Hla asked Special Branch (SB) police officers observing the incident why they did not intervene to stop the people who were illegally preventing worshippers from entering the pagoda, the officers did not answer.

¶4. (C) An Embassy observer noticed about 100 persons in plainclothes (Naw Ohn Hla said there were 500) surround Naw Ohn Hla and her friends and shouted at them to go away and screamed that the NLD was not welcome. The Tuesday Worshippers finally retreated to the bottom of the lower staircase and prayed near the guardian lions. When they concluded their prayers with "May Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, U Tin Oo and all political prisoners be free," the crowd hooted and jeered to drown out their prayers.

DO NOTHING AUTHORITIES  
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¶5. (C) Naw Ohn Hla is sure the people who blocked her from entering the pagoda were members of the regime's mass-member organization, the Union Solidarity Development Association (USDA). She recognized the chairman of Western Shwegondine Peace and Development Council (PDC) in the crowd. Naw Ohn Hla also told us she had heard many unemployed vagrants had been recruited to block the worshippers with the promise of a meal. Naw Ohn Hla also saw LtCol Thein Hteik Oo, a Rangoon military commander in the background.

¶6. (C) After leaving the pagoda, Naw Ohn Hla went to the Bahan Township police station to file a complaint against those who prevented her from worshipping. Just before she finished filing the report, the police chief arrived and complained that the NLD was trying to start a riot at the

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pagoda. Naw Ohn Hla replied that her right to freedom of worship had been violated and she intended to file a report. The police insisted that only the entire group could file the report, not just Naw Ohn Hla, so she left without filing.

A QUIETER TUESDAY  
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¶7. (C) On January 23, Embassy employees observed several SB, USDA, and ward PDC officials present at the pagoda, but this time they did not try to stop the Tuesday Worshippers who prayed at the Tuesday Planetary Post for about 15 minutes. A new element was a group of Buddhist monks who were on hand, apparently to show support for the Tuesday Worshippers. According to an unconfirmed report, the 88 Generation Students motivated the monks to turn out in force. Labor activist Su Su Nway was at the pagoda to observe the prayer service, but did not actively participate. Also on hand to observe was Ohn Than, a 15-year political prisoner veteran who recently wrote an open letter to the SPDC leadership. He was reportedly dressed in prisoner garb. NLD youth activists and members of the 88 Generation Students showed up in force to give support.

NAW OHN HLA  
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¶8. (C) Naw Ohn Hla is an ethnic Karen in her early 40s from Hmawby Township in Rangoon Division. She was a former NLD activist until the NLD leadership terminated her party membership in February 2005. NLD spokesperson Myint Thein told Poloff the party was forced to dismiss her because she refused to maintain party discipline by continually engaging in political protests not approved by NLD leadership. He recounted that when authorities once blocked Aung San Suu Kyi's convoy during a trip to the Ayeyarwady Delta, the NLD decided to cancel the trip. Naw Ohn Hla, however, refused to leave the scene and NLD members had to force her into the car so they could return to Rangoon. She also staged a solo

protest in front of the house of NLD Chairman Aung Shwe. NLD leaders claim that her "rash" protests once caused the authorities to detain key NLD leaders for a period forcing them to disassociate the party from her activities. Despite her expulsion from the NLD, Naw Ohn Hla maintains a good relationship with many of the party's members and avidly supports Aung San Suu Kyi.

19. (C) COMMENT: Naw Ohn Hla's weekly prayer vigil puts the regime in a difficult position. The Generals do not want to be seen preventing Buddhists from worshipping at pagodas, so they have resorted to using plain-clothed USDA members rather than uniformed officials to harass Naw Ohn Hla and her Tuesday Worshippers. However, their tactics backfired. Last week's attack only succeeded in strengthening support for Naw Ohn Hla's weekly vigil and added new, high-profile participants to the weekly event. It revealed a growing willingness to defy authorities and thugs. END COMMENT.  
VILLAROSA